

2-10-03
PO Box 18052
Coffman Cove, AK 99918

Local Boundary Commission
Anchorage, AK

Dear Commission Members:

I testified on Saturday Feb.8 as the former Mayor of Coffman Cove and former Southeast Island School Board Member. I was asked some questions by one of the commission members regarding the island of Prince of Wales. It made me realize that maybe the commission does not have a good grasp on what our area of the state is like. Since our state is so big it is like comparing Indiana with Alabama. If you have never been there a person would not realize how different they are.

Prince of Wales was very sparsely populated until the logging started in the 50's. A number of logging camps turned into communities. During the logging era most people on the island lived in company housing. The land was owned by the US Government. Since then communities have had local land sales. This has taken place in the last 10-15 years. These are developing communities. Craig has the most local government of any of the communities. Kasaan and Klawock are native communities that have a large percentage of non-native residents. I am not sure about the land ownership in their communities. I know Klawock has some private land available. Hydaburg is a very native community with a few non-natives living there. They are similar in makeup to Metlakatla. The island is mostly US Forest Service land with very large tracts of native corporation holdings, mental health, State and University of Alaska land, all non-taxable.

When the logging was at its best, there were good jobs available and the money was flowing, most people did not own land. Now that the logging has all but stopped, the people who are left are here by choice, and struggling to build a life after logging. They have been forced by the closure of the camps to buy land and build. It has been tough. Craig had an advantage because they started earlier. We can barely support our local governments. It would be really tough to support another layer of government at this time with more rules and regulations. The older communities have a resident population that includes commercial fishermen. This industry has been hard hit by low fish prices and closures of the canneries. The island is getting a large summer population of people who come up and commercial fish, charter fish or vacation. They all leave as soon as the summer is over making it even harder for small communities to survive. This is what we are doing right now; surviving. We can't support a borough government, bonds, assessments or anything else.

What seems to be driving this forced borough is the four school districts on the island, and the fact the REAA communities do not pay school tax. We do support our schools. We have fund raisers for activities and travel that the schools in the big population areas

do not have to pay since they collect taxes for their schools. There is a strong sentiment around the island that we would be willing to pay some sort of a fair and equitable school tax. Craig and Klawock already support their school with local revenues. Perhaps it is time to think seriously about consolidating some school districts and services. The fear is that the local communities will be forced to bus their kids for hours at a time to the larger communities, specifically Craig. If we could guarantee this would not happen as long as the enrollment is above 10, we could probably work towards this end. It is a much better solution than a borough. Maybe in 10-20 years a borough would make sense, but not now.

These are my personal viewpoints. I am active on the Prince of Wales Island Community Advisory Council, the Health Advisory Council and work as the Projects Manager for the City of Coffman Cove. This subject has been discussed for years on the island. I would be very happy to answer any questions or clarify anything you do not understand about our area. I lived in Wrangell, Haines, Kodiak and Anchorage before settling here 23 years ago. I know how different this state is from one region to another, and I understand you have been directed to undertake this project. I hope your recommendations will be based on all factors and not just the opinions of some legislators with a personal agenda. I think you will agree that we need to make some changes, but the formation of a borough is not the answer at this time.

Feel free to call me at 329-2232 anytime. Thank you.

Elaine Price